

DYING HUNTERS, POISON PLANTS, AND MUTE  
SLAVES: NATURE AND TRADITION IN  
CONTEMPORARY NUOSU YI POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Themes of nature and traditional culture are common in the works of ethnic poets from a subgroup of the large Yi 彝 ethnic group of southwest China known as the Nuosu 诺苏. Nuosu culture is synonymous with the Liangshan 凉山 Mountains of southern Sichuan 四川 Province. Since the 1980s several dozen Nuosu poets have emerged to form what can be called the 'Liangshan School' of contemporary Chinese poetry. Drawing on theory from Ethnopoetics, Eco-literature, and Folkloristics the paper introduces major themes in the works of these Nuosu poets and introduces poems by three poets who distinctly utilize nature imagery from a common pool of Yi cultural traditions. These traditions include oral literature, ritual, folk costume, and traditional ideas about social hierarchy and gender relations. Much of the nature imagery is related to folk knowledge of native animals and plants. A major theme in the poetry is the response to changes in tradition and the local environment brought about by rapid growth and development in China.

KEY WORDS

Yi, Nuosu, Liangshan, Ethnopoetics, nature

## INTRODUCTION

In this eco-conscious age, increasing attention is being paid to the relationship between literature and the environment (Garrard 2004). Eric Ball, in a recent issue of *American Folklore Studies* has called upon scholars to specifically investigate how local ethnic poets deal with native ecologies in their works, taking a Cretan poet as example (2006, 275-276; Bender 2008, 6). Such focus on local cultures recalls the Ethnopoetics movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, in which certain activist Western poets called upon urban-based, resource hungry populations to appreciate the traditional ecological wisdom of endangered tribal cultures as expressed in their oral poetry (Snyder 1977; Rothenberg 2002). From another angle, promoters of 'deep ecology' have also seen traditional cultures as sources of inspiration for sustained human living on the planet (Grim 2001, 54). Such endeavors, whether confined to translations and museum exhibits or linked to more radical agendas for change, promote the creation of global perspectives on the local, enriched by insights into the diversity of experiences from cultures and groups across the planet.

In Southwest China, the relation between humans and the natural environment is an especially important dimension of the works of ethnic Yi poets from the Greater and Lesser Liangshan Mountains (Da Liangshan 大凉山, Xiao Liangshan 小凉山) in southern Sichuan Province. The officially recognized Yi ethnic minority group (Yizu 彝族) numbers over six million, and is composed of dozens of diverse subgroups (including the Nuosu, Lipo 里泼, Nisupo 尼苏泼, and Azhe 阿哲) living throughout the mountainous areas of Yunnan 云南, Sichuan, and Guizhou 贵州 provinces, and the Guangxi 广西 Zhuang 壮 Autonomous Region. Following traditional subsistence patterns of agriculture and herding, the Yi have rich traditions of oral poetry and written verse (Li 1994; Bamo 2000; Zuo 2006).



Since the early 1980s, an increasing number of Yi poets—many of them Nuosu—have added their voices to the vast concert of poetic production in China today. A significant amount of their work displays elements of traditional culture and nature lore, often in contexts of concern over increasing cultural and environmental change. Evidencing this trend, a recent international conference was held in Meigu 美姑 County on the theme of traditional Yi knowledge and the environment, along with a smaller conference on the theme of nature in modern Yi poetry (Bender 2006).<sup>1</sup>

The first half of this paper offers a brief introduction to poets of the Nuosu subgroup of Yi, and discusses the incorporation of traditional lore and nature imagery in their works. The second half examines examples of poems by three Nuosu poets, each with a unique style and vision. It is hoped this introduction will raise awareness of one of many local poetry "micro-environments" in China and offer new material for probing questions of literature and the environment in local cultures in China and elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> The major meeting was the Fourth International Conference on Yi Studies, on the theme of 'Traditional *Bimo* Knowledge and the Environment'. Several papers dealt with eco-literary themes (Bender 2006). The smaller gathering, on the theme of nature and Yi poetry, was chaired by poet Aku Wuwu and resulted in a volume of conference papers entitled *Poetic Meigu* (Luo and Liu 2006). Many Yi poets, including Jidi Majia, as well as the internationally acclaimed poet/ novelist Wang Ping 王屏 and the present author were in attendance.

## BACKGROUND ON POETRY OF THE LIANGSHAN SCHOOL

Beginning in the early 1980s a number of poets of the Yi ethnic group have emerged on local, national, and even international literary scenes (Li 2004).<sup>2</sup> Many of these poets are Nuosu, a subgroup of the Yi who live mostly in the Greater and Lesser Liangshan Mountains in southern Sichuan and parts of northern Yunnan (Harrell 2001, 81-103).<sup>3</sup> Constituting a unique and largely self-contained literary micro-environment, the contemporary 'Liangshan School' of Chinese poetry involves several dozen poets, among them Jidi Majia 吉狄马加; Luowu Laqie 倮伍拉切; Ma Deqing 马德清; Bamo Qubumo 巴莫曲布嫫; Aku Wuwu 阿库乌雾; (Luo Qingchun 罗庆春); Asu Yue'er 阿

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<sup>2</sup> I thank the Liangshan Culture Bureau, Xichang 西昌 City, Sichuan; Jidi Majia; Ma Deqing; Asu Yue'er; Aku Wuwu; Lu Juan 鲁娟; other Nuosu poets; and poet/ painter/ critic Liyuan Xiaodi 栗原小荻 (of the Bai 白 ethnic group) for input into this paper. Thanks also to Marston Bender, Fu Wei 付卫, Bai Yifan 白弈凡, and Wu Shan 吴姗 for help in various ways. Funding was provided by The Ohio State University Seed Grant program and a Fulbright grant. All translations of poems in this article were done by Mark Bender, with the exception of Aku Wuwu's poems, which were translated by Bender in cooperation with the poet.

<sup>3</sup> A number of words in Northern Yi Romanization—based on the standard for Nuosu speakers—are used in this paper. The final consonants /t/, /x/, and /p/ are tone markers for three of the four speech tones in Northern Yi (one tone—a level tone—is unmarked). Thus, they should not be pronounced as part of the spelling. In certain cases in this paper, Yi words frequently used in English writings are given without the tone marks (such as *bimo*, *sunyi*, and *shuo ma*). See Bradley (2001) for more on the Yi language.

苏越尔; Eni Mushasijia 俄尼牧莎斯加; Sha Ma 沙马; Jimu Langge 吉木狼格 several very young poets such as Lu Juan and Asuo Layi 阿索拉毅; and Fa Xing 发星, a poet of Han 汉 Chinese background who writes on Nuosu themes (n.ed. 2002; Li 2004, 420; Bender 2005, 113-114).<sup>4</sup>

Formative influences on poets of the Liangshan School range from Classical Chinese Poetry to styles of Modern Chinese Poetry to translations of foreign literature. Ethnic Yi poets such as Wuqi Lada 吴琪拉达 (of Guizhou and Sichuan) and Tipu Zhibu 替朴支不 (of Guangxi) emerged in the 1950s and began exploring modern styles of poetry, often with folk themes. In the years after the disastrous Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a new generation of Yi poets was stimulated by the emerging Chinese poetic currents of the time, in particular the 'Misty' or 'Obscure' (*menglong* 朦胧) poets of the late 1970s and other trends in the 1980s that combined nostalgia for the traditional past with exploration of new form and content. With the outstanding exception of Jimu Langge, who is associated with the 'Not-Not/' 'Non-ism' (*Fei-fei* 非非) group that formed in Chengdu 成都 in the early 1980s, most Yi poets have not been deeply involved in the various avant-garde poetry movements (Jimu 2002; Day 2005, 338; Day 2006; Dayton 2006).<sup>5</sup>

Besides single-authored collections published by a variety of local and national publishing houses, works of the Liangshan poets (and critical articles concerning them) them appear in journals such as *Liangshan Literature* (*Liangshan wenxue* 凉山文学), *Nationalities Literature* (*Minzu wenxue*

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<sup>4</sup> See References for works of some of these poets.

<sup>5</sup> Besides Jimu Langge and in a different sense, Jidi Majia, other Liangshan poets that write somewhat more to the mainstream in subject matter and voice are Sha Ma and Lu Juan. For essays on current trends in Chinese poetry see Lupke (2007).

民族文学), various other local and national literary journals, journals of local universities and institutes, and unofficial collections and journals (such as *Yi Wind* [Yifeng 彝风]) printed at private expense. Many of the poets are employed in local culture bureaus in the Liangshan mountain regions and at ethnic minority institutes and universities in Xichang 西昌, Chengdu, and Beijing 北京. Conferences on Yi culture and literature sponsored by these entities are held regularly, at which many poets present papers. Informal gathering places include Yi-themed restaurants in Chengdu and one in Beijing, run by members of the Nuosu rock group *Mountain Eagle* (*Shanying* 山鹰). The 'Native Tongue Bar' (*Muyu jiuba* 母语酒吧), now in its second location, was opened in 2004 by a consortium of private Nuosu investors. The salon draws artists, poets, writers, editors, musicians, and *bon vivantes* of various ethnic backgrounds (though mostly Nuosu) and at times has a 1950s 'Beat-like' feel, regularly featuring budding Nuosu pop groups, occasional poetry readings, and lively drinking parties. In 2008, the Yi women's folk singing group *Amo Niuniu* 阿莫妞妞 (literally 'mother's youngest daughter'; also a folk tune) opened a similar gathering place called 'Three Women Bar' (*Sange nüren jiuba* 三个女人酒吧). There is a small but influential Nuosu community in Beijing which includes several well-placed officials, researchers, artists, dancers, singers, and writers. Several poets of the Liangshan School are involved in international outreach via the web, conferences, translations, exhibitions, scholarly exchanges and collaboration, and international travel. Nevertheless, the school is still largely a regional phenomenon, being a socially constructed expression of contemporary Nuosu culture framed within the concept of a greater Yi ethnic culture of southwest China.

Besides the detectable influences of modern Chinese-language poetry and translations of foreign poets, the most basic feature marking the poetry of the Liangshan

School is the strong imprint of Nuosu folk traditions. Despite increasing inroads of competing cultural forces, the traditional forms of expressive culture, including oral poetry, ritual, and material culture, are still powerful sources of theme, imagery, and inspiration shared and utilized explicitly or implicitly by virtually all of the Liangshan poets (Yu and Luo 2001, 37-43; Li 2004).<sup>6</sup>

Yet, with one major exception, all poetry written by the Liangshan poets is composed in Chinese.<sup>7</sup> Like many other ethnic minority authors in Sichuan and other parts of China, Chinese is the language of choice for Nuosu poets due to it being the common literary medium for most of China—allowing comparatively easy access to literate readers and presses. That said, many Liangshan poets seem to write with a literate Yi audience in mind. As one poet put it: "I am caught between Chinese and Western poetry, yet a part of neither." Aside from being ethnically different than other poets in China, the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the Nuosu poets vary among themselves. Those from rural areas sometimes learn Chinese only in grade school. Others grow up in multi-cultural county seats, sometimes as the children of local officials, exposed to the 'other' tongue and culture at an early age.

Commenting on this situation, maverick poet Aku Wuwu, who writes in both Nuosu and Chinese, has argued that the poems of the present era are largely written by poets who are 'cultural hybrids' (*wenhua hunxue* 文化混血) conversant to varying degrees in both Yi and Han cultures.

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<sup>6</sup> See Harrell (2001, 183-189) for examples of traditional and emergent/ performative cultural display in regards to Nuosu ethnicity.

<sup>7</sup> Dayton (2006) has recently discussed the usage of Chinese by three ethnic poets (Miao, Tibetan, and Yi) in his MA thesis, highlighting the work of the *avant-garde* Nuosu poet, Jimu Langge.

These poets are producing a sort of 'hybrid literature' that exists within the dynamics of rapidly changing and complex cultural contexts increasingly removed from traditional Yi culture and literature (Luo 2001, 57-58). Along these lines, Jidi Majia (2004, 175) has optimistically stated:

I live in a region where traditional and modern thinking, traditional culture and modern civilization are in sharp conflict and collision, creating an immense head of water which will, I think, propel my people into unprecedented change and enable us to turn out world-shaking literature.

In brief outline, the outstanding characteristics of poetry created by the Liangshan School are:

1. The ambivalent themes of ethnic pride and unique identity, as well as cultural loss, disorientation, and survival;
2. a pervasive, sometimes emblematic use of diverse local knowledge of Yi material culture that includes foodways, customs, and material culture;
3. references to Yi myths, legends, stories, folksongs, and folk performances;
4. the invoking of traditional rituals and images of ritualists and elders, particularly the literate ritual specialists known as *bimo*;
5. romantic portraits of vibrant young women and men that accord with traditional gender-based ethos of beauty and heroism;
6. portraits of hunters, herders, and country folk;
7. themes of ethnic group, family, and parents (especially mothers);
8. a great sensitivity to and identification with, the natural world of the Liangshan Mountains and human interaction with that world;

9. a realization by many poets that the natural world is changing (as is Yi culture) due to the pressures of economic development;
10. the creation of an individual, metonymic voice in which the 'I' tends to explore a 'tribal' or group vision rather than a solely personal one—in contrast to many more mainstream poets; and
11. a propensity to write from experience—whether that of everyday life, a remembered oral story, a momentary reverie, or dreams. The act of peeling a potato drawn from the coals, a sleeping figure in a felt cloak on the road, a dog bark in the night, a charm worn by a colleague at a conference, a few lines of song or story, may stimulate a poem.

In his studies of oral poetry John Miles Foley has employed the term 'traditional referentiality' to describe meanings that are often metonymic, that native audiences find in local oral traditions (1995). To a certain extent, meaning in the works of the Liangshan poets is also dependant on images utilizing insider or local knowledge. Metonymic images may depict one or a few individuals (hunters, herders, ritualists, singers, local beauties, etc.), or evoke emblematic items, attributes, or folk ideas of Yi culture (felt cloaks, rhododendron flowers, mouth harps, heroism and beauty, the colors white, black, yellow, and red, etc.), often in contexts set in, or related to a natural world that is a resource for human endeavors and sustenance, but lies beyond complete control. These sorts of culture-specific references can sometimes prove challenging to interpret. This is especially true for the works by poets raised deep in the traditional culture and who write in part for a similar audience. But the efforts required to dispel the occasional opaqueness can yield glimpses of a vision of a world in physical and spiritual immediacy with the natural

environment remote to many urbanites today, and distant even to many urban Yi.

Orientation to a world linked to nature by ritual and myth is a dimension explored by several poets. Underpinning the theme are the traditions of *bimo* priests who still regularly conduct the complex Yi funeral rites, and (as do *sunyi* shamans) hold rituals for ridding homes of malevolent ghosts and calling back wandering souls of afflicted persons.<sup>8</sup> An important aspect of this poetics is the relation of poetry to maintenance of ethnic identity and transmission of tradition in relation to the culture of the 'ancestors'. In some instances mention of traditional nature lore is utilized to create a sense of place, immediacy, cultural depth, and continuity which, in poet Aku Wuwu's words, allows the poems to act as 'textbooks' that stimulate the younger generation to keep in touch with the old ways. The Liangshan poets often draw on traditional narratives such as the *Book of Origins* (Nuosu, *Hnewo tepyy*) as sources of mythic figures, specific rituals, details of customs, and knowledge of plants and animals (Bender 2008). This work, with both oral and written versions communicated by the *bimo* priests, relates the stages of creation of life on earth and the early history of the Yi tribes.

Many poems of the Liangshan School express sentiments of longing for a culture perceived to be removed from the poets by a shift to urban life or changes in Yi society fostered by the rapidly growing economy that draws many young people out from the mountains and brings in

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<sup>8</sup> A *bimo* is a folk priest/ tradition-bearer who reads and recites the traditional scripture written in Yi and conducts various rituals to deal with harmful ghosts, recall wandering souls, and so on. *Sunyi* are shamans who use drumming to enter trance states while conducting rituals dealing with lesser ghosts.



changes from the outside. The forces of change include decades of resource development programs which have pressured forest, water, and mineral resources in the Yi regions. The sense of a balanced relation with nature, though challenged and compromised by the forces of change, still lingers in some rural areas, and may continue as a theme in Yi poetry where it may serve as a spiritual force at once intimately tied to Yi identities and as a source of aesthetic power in poetry. In all, from many angles, it would be difficult to imagine a modern Yi poetry without the imagery of nature in relation to human society.

## CASE STUDIES

In the paragraphs below I explore how three accomplished modern Liangshan poets—each from a different orientation—draw on traditional expressive forms and local knowledge of the environment to create their poetic works. Thick with cultural lore ranging from hunting practices and plant knowledge to customary behavior and ritual, the following poems illustrate many of the themes and characteristics of the Liangshan School of contemporary Chinese poetry.

### *Jidi Majia: Hunters and Prey*

Born in 1961, Jidi Majia (Jidi Lueqie Majialage 吉狄略且 马加拉格) has described himself as "a shoal where rivers meet," who has received the "stamp of Han culture and the shadow of other foreign cultures" (Jidi 2004, 169). With roots in the Butuo 布拖 area of the Greater Liangshan prefecture, he spent part of his youth in the prefecture capital, Xichang. Early influences on his literary development were traditional poetic narratives such as

'Mother's Daughter' ('Amo hnisse', an emotional bridal lament) and stories from the *Book of Origins*. He also read ancient and modern Han Chinese poets, from Du Fu 杜甫 to Guo Moruo 郭沫若, and foreign poems by Elizabeth Barret Browning and Aleksandr Pushkin. At Southwest Nationalities University (*Xinan minzu daxue* 西南民族大学) in Chengdu, he was exposed to a wider world of literature and eventually found the works of Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, and other Central and South American, and African poets.

Soon after graduating with a degree in Chinese literature, Jidi began publishing Chinese-language poems in high-profile journals such as *Stars* (*Xingxing* 星星). In 1985, he published his first of several collections of poems and was soon established as the first and most influential of the Post-Mao Liangshan poets, his ground-breaking 'cross-over' works giving the Yi a contemporary voice within mainstream Chinese literary circles (Aku 2002, 346; Li 2004, 420-436). As his stature increased, his poems offered thematic and stylistic templates for other up-and-coming Nuosu poets, such as his childhood friend Luowu Laqie, as well as Asu Yu'er, Bamo Qubumo (known also for her work on Yi oral tradition), and others. In recent years Jidi was briefly the standing secretary of the Chinese Writer's Association, a vice-president of the influential All-China Youth Federation, and is presently a vice-governor of Qinghai 青海 Province. His works have been translated into Italian, German, Japanese, and English.

In his poem 'The Final Summons', Jidi explores the theme of tradition and change in Nuosu culture by means of a central human character—a hunter skilled at setting traps for leopards (Jidi 1992, 26-27). The images focus on the hunter as a dying breed—the last of his kind—a mountain man with skills that no longer fit the coming age, yet a man part and parcel of the natural world and dear in the collective memory of the local folk. The poem hints at

traditional Yi beliefs about the 'give and take' between humans and nature's bounty. Hunters traditionally begged their prey for forgiveness, and stated why they needed to take their life. Similar rituals also accompanied cutting trees. The poem suggests that as the hunter has killed many wild creatures, he is finally summoned to his own death, caused by a crossbow dart from one of his traps. Ironically, the most capable of hunters is killed by one of the very hunting tools that have sustained him. Portrayed as an emblem of traditional Yi manliness, the hunter is a man who walks both within the human realm and that of the wilds. He is at ease with the tools of the hunt and the ways of the forests and rivers and is also portrayed as an object of desire by Yi women, who sing of him in their folk songs.

### The Final Summons

*"Unluckily, he was pierced through the breast by the last  
arrow he set."*

*—a recollection*

Whether at dawn or dusk he always went to the hills  
to hunt leopards, to hunt for the ancestors' greatest glory.  
As his soul spoke to the forest, he placed there  
hidden traps.

(To hear the mountain folk tell it,  
in his youth his name was  
married to the wind  
and sent very far away  
because of the  
many leopards  
he caught.)

A man of few words, his forehead was a rich diary of  
living.

Only in that joyful, overflowing, stillness of a highland  
lake,

did he with a low nasal pitch, did he with a deep-chested  
pitch

launch a lengthy folksong, wending here and there,  
making the hearts of those women quake,  
incomparably flooded by heaving, billowing waves;  
making the noses of those women tingle—a feeling  
more brilliant than the evening cliffs.

Atop his skull was a vista of primordial deluge, of  
shimmering images,

his brown breast full of wild nature and love's vistas,  
there letting those women in the high plots plant  
undying beliefs.

(To hear the mountain folk tell it,  
at this time he was already old  
but he insisted on going to set  
a last hidden trap,  
to take a leopard.

To hear the mountain folk tell it  
that day as he walked towards the mountain,  
it was just at dusk.

He, alone, pouring forth a song.  
This time he really did go,  
never to return.

Later, people discovered  
he had died at the hidden set.

That last trap's dart had  
struck him in the chest.)

Dropping down,  
like an unfolding plain drowsing under the stars;  
his open eyes allowing the Milky Way  
to issue a bit of untranslatable language,  
Now, let his death-wrought rest seem like  
a tree standing atop a mountain peak;  
Now, let those women who loved him seem

like sunbirds perching in that tree.  
Thereafter the story of a real man  
spread out from that mountain—  
though fate, at times,  
gives such harsh garments to wear.  
(According to those mountain folk,  
he really did die,  
and in that place of his death,  
after an unknown number of years,  
a woman who later died,  
was also cremated there.)

In regards to Yi culture, the hunter's death seems to symbolize a dying tradition. By the end of the poem the story of the man's life and death becomes manifest in the image of the mountain tree, suggesting that while the story may linger in the folk tradition, the Yi will no longer be hunters, some excelling in other livelihoods in an altered world. Thus, the connection of the Yi to the primal wilds seems to die with the death of the hunter, who would no longer hunt for leopards, for "the ancestors' greatest glory." While the poem is a reverie of regret over the destruction of the natural environment and a lifestyle to some extent still dependent on the resources of that world, the message is: leave the old ways behind in all but memory and imagination—for already much of tradition is residing there like the old tree on the side of the cliff. Thus nature is used as a backdrop for musings on social evolution.

In another of Jidi's several poems on the hunter theme, the poet draws on folk wisdom regarding the hunting of the fanged water deer (*Hydropotes inermis*; Nuosu, *le*; Chinese, *zhangzi* 獐子). Images of this once-common, antler-less species appear in many contemporary Nuosu poems and traditional literature.

## Water Deer Call

*Following the bleat of the water deer doe,  
the buck comes towards me;  
at this moment death arrives.  
—The words of an old hunter.*

I exhausted all my courage sounding  
the bleat of the water deer;  
blowing the sound of the doe.  
My lungs were a condensed sea,  
one nostril the Yangzi River,  
one nostril the Yellow River.  
The call made a sound like falling tides at dusk,  
exposing unseen feminine light,  
golden vapor silently floating,  
so long, and so soft.  
The tender, finely spun poem  
seemed secretly married to that soft glimmer,  
as if donning liquid raiment  
that the buck feels in its skin.  
But I am forever clear that  
I am a male caller and  
each tree leaf helps  
me in the deception.  
I wait as if having mistaken  
the time of a meeting.  
Jittery nerves turn to reverent calm  
as the long gun barrel silently extends  
and aims at the hesitant buck,  
letting it walk into the trap.  
Whereupon I take it into custody,  
greeting the buck at the finality of its death.  
When my calling and the  
gunshot ended,  
I seem to have glimpsed

sparse glimmers of female aura  
embracing a world,  
lighting it up so brightly.  
I know not why, but my heart felt  
a sudden blast of deep autumn wind,  
like the winters of the north—that cold.  
I ground the call to bits,  
mixed with the blood of my lips,  
then threw it to a place hidden  
from other eyes.  
To tell the truth  
I nearly cried  
and thought to fib,  
fearing that those who love me would  
know.

The poet conjures images of the country's greatest rivers, in one breath uniting north and south China in a world of animal visions raised on the quivering bleats of a call made from a folded tree leaf. The leaf, however, complicit in the taking of a life by the promise of renewed life in the mating ritual, is cast aside in shame, as the hunter waxed poet turns reflexive, catching a glimpse (imagined or real) of the quick line between life and death, as he allows emotion to enter an arena from which it is usually barred. As in many of Jidi's poems, introspection of self as poet proceeds beyond that of ethnic personae, a movement enhanced or enabled by imagery taken from both tradition and nature.

*Aku Wuwu: Monkey Skulls and Poison Plants*

Aku Wuwu, whose Chinese name is Luo Qingchun, was born in 1964 in a remote village in Mianning 冕宁 County. Raised by his mother and several sisters, he learned to

speak Chinese around age seven when he began attending school—which he reached by crossing a chain link bridge across the churning Yalong 雅砻 River. Singular among the Liangshan poets, Aku has created two corpus of poetry. One is several collections of poetry in Chinese, the medium used by other Liangshan poets. The other is a substantial body of works written in the standardized script of Northern Yi dialect (Nuosu) (Bender 2005; Aku and Bender 2006). These Nuosu poems, in particular, tend to be vortexes of culture-bound meanings permeated by myth, ritual, folk belief, and nature lore. His use of local knowledge goes far beyond highlighting ethnic awareness and combines explorations of self-within-tribe while probing into individual consciousness and being. At times the many references to tradition combined with his unique vision make his poems opaque, if not wholly obscure to cultural outsiders and even to some Yi readers. Moreover, there is only a small audience with high level reading abilities in Nuosu. Aku has often relied on oral performance to relate his Nuosu poems, especially readings of his famous poem 'Calling Back the Soul of Zhyge Alu' ('Ax lu yyr kut'; 'Zhao hun 招魂'). Several of his native tongue poems are included in children's textbooks widely used throughout schools in mountain communities where he occasionally holds public readings for semi-literate audiences. It is notable that no one has yet translated his Nuosu poems into Chinese.

On one level, Aku's use of tradition is intended to instruct younger generations in aspects of their heritage—reminders that though the present is changing, they have a past from which to draw spiritual sustenance. This feature, which parallels functions of the *Book of Origins* and other traditional Yi works, is especially prominent in ethnographically thick poems such as the aforementioned 'Zhyge Alu' in which appear unqualified references to many customs, rituals, supernatural beings, and plants and animals with mythical or cultural significance (Bender 2005, 123-



127). In a somewhat more transparent poem entitled 'Tiger Skins' ('La njy') he traces the uses and meanings of tiger skins through the generations of grandfather, father, and son—the latter "never having seen a tiger" (Bender 2005, 121-122; Aku 2008, 40) The motif of the tiger skin becomes a symbol of the loss of both the natural world and of traditional Nuosu culture.

Many of his Nuosu language poems, however, take on even more challenging tracks and re-cast traditional elements into fantastic landscapes of dream and imagination where the poet seems to adopt a 'catch me if you can' approach in deference to his muse. Among such poems is the highly autobiographical text entitled 'A nyut vap lot' ('Monkey Skullcap Dipper'). The poet delves into the recesses of childhood experiences in a prose poem that is hauntingly visceral, and sometimes almost whimsical:

### Monkey Skullcap Dipper<sup>9</sup>

When a child, my muted, seventy-year old mother  
tied a sawed-off monkey skullcap to my collar;  
a delicate, crafted dipper,  
just like a calabash.  
It was like the little watch dog before the door  
of my home, under the overhang out front.  
Each day when out guarding crops or herding,  
I would wear the skullcap on my chest for drinking,  
so the water ghosts wouldn't harm me.  
When others asked me  
I didn't dare say—indeed, was unwilling to say that  
it was a skullcap.  
So I would say right away: 'Monkey dipper'.  
This monkey dipper was my ornament by day

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<sup>9</sup> Wuwu 1998, 146-147.

and by night my bedmate.

For whatever reason (I could not know)  
the fruits on the sour plum tree in front of my house  
grew more sour by the year.

Gradually, among the children of my age,  
the lovely name of my childhood was scooped away  
by the monkey skullcap dipper,  
'Monkey Dipper' taking the place of my real name.

At this time,

when a bird was caught in our family's trap  
(there in a sunlit patch of brambles)  
it always, mysteriously, escaped.

Gradually, month by month,  
everyone with a mouth in the village  
came to call me 'Monkey Dipper'.

As things came to pass,  
even when my own family was chatting,  
the name 'Monkey Dipper' would be spoken.

Meanwhile, when my dearest,  
toothless grandmother,  
was praising her grandson before neighbors and friends  
the name 'Monkey Dipper' would slip out  
—to be heard by me.

As for myself, I was a bit angry and  
ran to the shadows behind the house and  
looked at myself in the water to see  
if I looked like a monkey dipper.

The longer I looked the more  
I seemed to look like a dipper.

The deepest thoughts of mankind most probably come out  
of dreams;

in the night sky of dreams monkeys were thirsty,  
and I too, was thirsty.

In an instant I changed into a dipper  
and scooped water from the monkey's body to quench my  
thirst;

then in an instant the monkey changed into a dipper  
and scooped water from my body to quench its thirst.  
Awakening from the dream,  
I discovered that the monkey dipper—  
handed down from grandfather to father to son—  
was the slightest bit moist.  
Certainly, I thought,  
this monkey dipper holds some spiritual power,  
as by day it changed into a dipper to continuously follow  
me about.  
And by night it changed into a small boat that took me  
constantly back and forth  
between the worlds of monkeys and men.

The poem alludes to a number of Nuosu customs with an intensity seldom seen in the writings of other Yi poets, bespeaking the author's deeply rural roots. In recent conversations with Aku, now a professor of Yi literature at Southwest Nationalities University, he explained that the monkey skullcap dipper was a rare object reputed to have the power to scare off disease-bearing ghosts. It is associated with water and was sometimes carried for drinking when a person was in the wilds. It was said that the use of such a dipper could prevent the appearance of aggressive boils directly related to drinking bad water. Although reputed to be effective against ills of the wilds, dippers were not easily had as monkeys were among the animals taboo as game, in this case due to their human-like characteristics and their appearance in the *Book of Origins*. Anyone killing a monkey invited disaster brought on by ghosts. Thus, only the skull of an already dead monkey could be used for a dipper, though even this might invite questions. Today, monkeys are scarce as most are said to have been killed or carried off by outside traders.

In the poem the speaker recalls his childhood guilt over using the skull for his own protection. The reference to

the "muted, seventy year old mother" suggests the folk saying that

Shyp ci ddop ap ti; hxit ci va ap hxo.

At seventy, one cannot speak; at eighty, one cannot call chickens.

The saying holds the idea that persons over seventy have outlived their years and should stay out of the affairs of younger people, though in the poem the reference to seventy seems to be a child's recollection of an older than usual mother, and not a literal age. Longevity is not a virtue in Nuosu culture as it is among the Han Chinese, and persons thought to have lived too long may be considered as strange beings, e.g., in some cases a wife will elect to have a living funeral once her husband has died. Once her funeral is held, she lives in a sort of 'betwixt and between' state, her soul already in the land of the dead, but her physical body still alive. At death no ritual is held other than simple cremation.

The term *a nyut vap lot* 'monkey skullcap dipper' as used in the poem, was actually a made-up word by Aku Wuwu as a child and is not in the folk vocabulary, though some old people still recall the custom of dipper usage. Somehow, as the poem hints, the term became the speaker's childhood nickname and in the banter with his peers served to deflect further questioning on the origin of the skull (which was a family heirloom, now lost). Near the end, the line referring to passing an heirloom from grandfather, to father, to son is based on an old saying that goes

Pup chy hly bbyp lox; pat chy sse bbyp lox.

Grandfathers should hand down to grandsons; fathers should hand down to sons.

Thus, within the interstices of the highly clan-oriented Nuosu society, the image of the dipper in the division between natural and spiritual world becomes porous via the image of a portion of a living creature now imbued with a haunting, spiritual power that breaks barriers and mediates between time and space, dream and reality, the realm of humans and nature.

In the *Book of Origins* all living beings are said to be the children of snow—six sorts of beings with blood—the fauna (including humans)—and six sorts without blood—the flora. Wild plants, shrubs, and trees, cultivated plants, and plants used in rituals all enter the visions of the Liangshan poets. Plants that often appear in the poems include the sacred *yyrx yyr* grass, which is among the plants used in rituals of *bimo* priests; the lovely *shuo ma* (rhododendron) flower to which beautiful women are often compared; and the food crops of bitter and sweet buckwheat, potatoes, and a sort of edible turnip-like, native tuber (*vop ma*; or *yuangen* 圓根 in Chinese).

Aku Wuwu's embrace of dream and reverie is sometimes underlain with a current of rage, despair, melancholy, and cynical hope. Not content to see the Nuosu as isolated unto themselves, he regards their position in the mountains as a unique vantage point from which to comment on the vagaries of the wider world. In the following prose-poem he plunges deeply into the folklore surrounding an indigenous plant that grows in the Liangshan Mountains to project his vision of ethnic survival in a world of realpolitik. The poem is hardly transparent, and some knowledge of local botany is needed in the act of interpretation.

The subject plant, *ddu shyt*, grows at high altitudes and is known for its deadly poisonous root. The plant may be in the genus *Aconitum* that includes the poisonous monkshood, or the genus *Ariseama* that includes the Jack-in-the-pulpit. Both are poisonous medicinal herbs native to

southwest China and the Himalayas (Poling et al. 2003). Among the Nuosu, the plant is harvested and hung in the rafters to scare off ghosts. Those who search for the plant must chant a protective verse beforehand to ward off poisoning. It is said that when cattle eat the leaves, it improves their health. However, it is so poisonous that no other plants are said to grow near it and it is found only in rocky areas. Very tiny amounts, however, can be used to heal cuts or long-term wounds, though the herb must be applied around the wound, not directly on the wound. In the past, it was used as a poison against enemies. Hunters would also boil their arrow tips in a concoction of the herb.

In attempting to understand the text through the lens of insider knowledge, it is useful to understand that when *bimo* priests are sending off spirits to the other world there are three roads—one is black, one is mottled, and one is white—the former two must be avoided, and the white road taken. Acts committed in violation of traditional codes of conduct (or modern laws) that end in serious injury or death are considered black; those ending in a scuffle or minor injury are mottled; while those ending with constructive discourse are considered white. Thus, in this poem, 'black' is not just a color, but a degree of intensity in a negative direction, though in many instances the use of 'black' by Liangshan poets is highly positive, the name 'Nuosu' meaning 'black people'. Spirit and material existence are linked in the poem—if an ethnic group or nationality has 'poison', then there is no need to attempt to recall its wandering spirit (as is the Yi custom with lost souls). Without such a powerful poison—their unique cultural integrity—a people would easily be defeated and wiped out. Thus, a powerful 'Yi poison' is needed for the group to endure and develop on its own track.

Poison Weed<sup>10</sup>

Above our homes there are mountains. These mountains are  
without renown, but  
the poison *ddut shy* plant that grows there is famous. The  
stem and leaves are a vibrant  
green; its black root is deeply rooted; its flowers are like  
rippling cascades. People  
raise many cows and sheep; cows and sheep eat the leaves,  
and flourish. People raise  
honeybees; bees sip the plant nectar to make honey. We live  
amidst the poison *ddut*  
*shy* plants, the poison plants are our relatives. From ancient  
times, we have been  
married to this poison plant—down to today. So, for such a  
long time, our true  
descendants have become the true descendants of the *ddut*  
*shy* plant. Their life has a  
poison vapor within it; their bodies have a poison blood.  
Their love and thoughts have  
also a poison essence within, like a hidden spark burning—  
down to today. The  
intense blackness of its spirit; the intense blackness of its  
spirit.

All the other plants growing around have nothing but  
hatred for us. The hard  
rocks above and below ceaselessly struggle with us.

Although we appear to be  
humans, our bones are the bones of tigers. Or if appearing  
to be plants—we are plants  
of great poison. If the earth lacks us, then where would one  
go to find a place  
called 'Poison Mountain'? This *ddut shy* plant can not only  
poison humans, but poison

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<sup>10</sup> Wuwu (1998, 45-46).

ghosts as well. Thus if we no longer exist, then those who  
must eat poison to commit  
suicide will not find it; those ghosts fated to be poisoned,  
will not be poisoned. Human  
history requires poison, just as an infant needs mother's  
milk. Thus, in this world, if  
there are no poisonous plants, it cannot be considered a  
complete world.  
Beneath the skies, the dark mountain trees become yellowed  
body hairs; in the  
midst of the heavens the clouds endlessly clash—more so  
than humans do; brambles  
ceaselessly entangle; every sort of idea rises endlessly like  
steep crags. Yet in such an  
age, we remain small and silent within the sockets of the  
poison mountains. Though  
the mountains may collapse and erode away, yet our roots  
have deeply penetrated the  
earth, our poison has saturated the ground; our roots have  
deeply penetrated the rock,  
our poison has saturated the stone. Thus, wherever the rocks  
fall, our poison spreads;  
to wherever the earth erodes, our poison spreads—this is a  
very clear reality. If in this  
world all material things are like us—the material body  
poisonous, the vital spirit  
poisonous—is there any need to call back the soul of this  
world?

*Lu Juan (Adu Axi): Voice of a Mute Slave*

Lu Juan (Adu Axi 阿赌阿喜) is among the 'third generation' of younger Nuosu poets and her works have only recently begun to gain critical recognition. Born on 18 May 1982 in Leibo 雷柏 County, in the eastern Greater Liangshan



regions, her literary talents were recognized in middle school. Trained in both the medical and legal professions, she has published many poems in national and local poetry journals and won a national prize for new folk poets in 2004. *Indigo May* (*Wuyue de lan 五月的蓝*), published in December 2006, is her first book of poems (Lu 2006). As a child of the transitional 1990s, Lu's work is in ways more mainstream and unabashedly personal than the works of many more senior Liangshan poets and photographs of the poet in *Indigo May* depict her in both pop culture garb and traditional dress.

'Mute Slave' ('Ya nu 哑奴') is her most innovative and challenging poem to date (Lu 2006, 83-87). Registering in some degree her self-acknowledged debt to TS Eliot and other foreign Modernist poets, the poem combines themes common in the Liangshan School with techniques drawn from a broader range of contemporary Chinese poetry. In several instances, imagery is presented with no identifiable speaker, as if peering through a rippling lens of nutrient rich water, alternately hot and cold. This sense of portent ambiguity intentionally offers spaces for the reader's imagination to engage the text and fill in the blanks. For Nuosu readers, however, the blanks may be filled quite differently than readers without certain kinds of local knowledge.

In the beginning passage, for instance, reference is made to the traditional felt cloaks (*jieshy/ vala*) worn by both Nuosu men and women which have become emblematic of the culture. The *shuo hma*, referring to several varieties of rhododendron native to Sichuan, is essentially the Nuosu 'national' flower (and varieties of it are important among other Yi groups). The flower, often white in color and linked in the *Book of Origins* with speech and wisdom, is a symbol of women's beauty. (In Nuosu folk ideas physical beauty is seen as a source of women's power, as is bravery for men.)

A major theme in the poem is language and paralinguistic communication. Nuosu (Northern Yi) is a tonal language in the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan family—making it a cousin of the Chinese dialects, and also of Tibetan and Burmese (Bradley 2001). The language serves as a wonderful medium for a tradition of oral poetry comprised of folksongs, narrative poems, proverbs, and ritual chants. The imprint of this oral culture is felt strongly on the native tradition of writing, by which the *bimo* priests have for centuries recorded Yi traditions in five syllable lines of verse (Bamo 2000). Many ancient paper scrolls were lost in the Cultural Revolution, though some were hidden and preserved and are now in regular use. Today both the oral and written mediums of language are still vital, though urban youth are increasingly distanced from their mother tongue. The mouth harp, known as a women's instrument, is made of thin, pierced slats of bamboo, or sometimes flattened brass bullet cases. The slats are strummed before the open mouth and played much like a jaw's harp.

The poem also references common figures in Nuosu folklore. We hear of Coqo Ama 'cannibal grandmother', the wild woman of the mountains who sometimes disguises herself as a motherly figure and appears at mountain homes late at night in search of tasty children. The culture hero, Zhyge Alu, was born to a single mother who was impregnated by flying dragon-eagles. His exploits include shooting down the extra suns and moons that were causing an early era of global warming. Mention is also made of the Nuosu clan society that before the late 1950s was strictly stratified in classes of aristocrats, serfs, and slaves. Some passages also seem to allude to the many ancient migrations of Yi clans, the relevant genealogies of which are recited by *bimo* priests at virtually all rituals. This is hinted at in the lines 'Apu' to 'Ada' (that is, from 'grandfather' to 'father'). Common rituals include those held to call back wandering

souls that detach themselves from the ill and rites held for protecting family and clan against harmful ghosts. In the final passage, mention is made of a muntjac (*Muntiacus spp.*), which like the water deer, often appears in Yi folklore as a magical, shape-shifting creature.

Throughout the poem the poet evokes visceral images of the Nuosu traditions and the natural environment which are engaged from various perspectives. Most powerful is the reflexive casting of women's roles and agency within a traditional clan society which seems to be breaking at the seams under the pressure of unvoiced sources, some which may be internal, and some from outside. Dreams, reported speech, and a constant flow of images and sketchy narratives coalesce in the pregnant, paralinguistic voice of the imagined mouth harp through which the mute slave speaks. Sporadically echoing traditional *san duan shi* 三段诗 'three part poems', a traditional verse form often used in love songs, the poem begins on high (in this case a mountain top), then moves to images lower down the terrain that reflect the generalized world of humans, finally dwelling on images of individuals, in this case the silent passions of a young woman.

### Mute Slave

*"Speak not a word of the guardian spirit's secret."  
—a memory*

At dawn, descending the mountain,  
a felt cape brushed the first *shuo hma* flower  
this rough and  
wild rhythm;  
before I started to write  
the first passage just fell  
down

Relinquishing all grammar and vocabulary;  
all the sacred scrolls you could find nibbled up.  
When faced with invasion,  
the mother tongue was  
hidden within water buckets  
hidden behind millstones  
hidden within fireplaces  
but there was no escaping, and now not a word can be read;  
crushed like the foes of legend  
Facing a great wild fire,  
with ancient trunks crackling,  
the recollections of ancestors dance around the flames.  
Their faces are still clear in the mind:  
A thousand hunters walk by  
a thousand singers walk by  
a thousand craftsmen walk by.  
Shouting the names of those ancestors—  
who replies? Does anyone reply?  
The huge echo is unfathomable.  
Traveling backwards in time  
to witness it all,  
to be shocked by it all,  
able only to be silent,  
only knowing how to be silent:  
"Child wash your hands, and shut the door!"  
Going forth amidst such subtle directives.  
She was neither a grandchild of the crone, Coqo Ama,  
nor a descendant of the hero, Zhyge Alu,  
but rather one in the most unique blood line  
outside that of the lords;  
she grew at an imperceptible speed,  
in that accustomed way;  
unhurried, un-harried,  
and by necessity, that  
slow mode  
of delivery.

This was the special way  
of grandma's pregnancy,  
and her way of telling it.  
A king once said:  
"Believe, please, in genius, patience, and long life."  
As the *bimo* priest leans back against  
an ancient tree  
and wags a bell,  
beginning to chant the scriptures  
of the generations from 'Apu' to 'Ada',  
I return to mother's womb  
On that long road of the soul-calling,  
the oft told background is  
one of white snow piling up, naked branches falling;  
the tribe's horses unreal  
issuing along an ancient road  
and even more remarkable  
the endless multiples of perilous gorges,  
the deep black of beautiful steeds  
packing salt brighter than the snow,  
and even more remarkable  
the ninety-nine souls dead along the way,  
the laments of ninety-nine women  
recurring, one by one  
Relinquishing all grammar and vocabulary,  
imitating no sort of language.  
The distinct scent of fire and  
the brightness within hoof prints  
incite unsought poems in my dreams:  
"The sunlight strikes the mountain...  
one maiden, three deer."  
I remember but this, and forget the rest before dawn  
Before I became a woman  
I took out that part of the blood  
that leaps wildly  
and gave it to my Ada,

gave it to my older, my younger brothers.  
I will forever guard the deep secrets of that language,  
forever be a woman who tells no secrets.  
As for after love in the wild mountains,  
there was a barefoot man  
holding a sheepskin flagon of wine, sound asleep  
in front of a piece of 600-year-old stone,  
like a woman dreaming of poems.  
When men dream of women  
they dream of breasts like moonlight  
and hair like waterfalls.  
Before a woman  
sounds her mouth harp,  
he thinks:  
"Please let me die  
within your sweet breath."  
A woman, her body like a bow  
awaits the moment  
of the powerful shot,  
then with eagle-like magnificence  
disintegrates  
as the cycle of silence and explosion is complete:  
"To receive a satisfying end  
you will need the 10,000 years of patience  
by which waters smooth the stones."  
Relinquishing all grammar and vocabulary  
to enter a mouth harp, tears in the eyes.  
"The loveliest thing in this world"  
is when the mouth harp is playing,  
when it is the only mouth of silence,  
when it is the only expression of silence:  
wild flowers bloom in rage, springs weep;  
flocking sheep circle, songs echo back;  
sickness bolts, disaster is averted;  
life and death converse across bridges.  
"To guard a person, is to guard all secrets."

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I am a woman with a mouth harp for a mouth.  
The mouth harp is the overflowing sound of my breasts,  
the mouth harp is my lovely little belly,  
the mouth harp is my deep, silent abyss;  
from the long road of monthly blood  
to a glorious conception  
the mouth harp vibrates its ancient lips  
towards the muntjac leaping through the hills:  
"I am all the silences' silence,  
I am a woman who tells no secrets."

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PHOTOGRAPHS

The ground-breaking Yi poet, Jidi Majia.



Jidi Majia with two *bimo* priests, Meigu conference (2005).

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Aku Wuwu presenting prizes for native tongue compositions at a primary school in Liangshan Prefecture (2007).



Aku Wuwu reciting Nuosu-language poems at a cultural festival in Liangshan Prefecture (2008).



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Cover of *Tiger Tracks* (Lat jjuj), one of Aku Wuwu's Nuosu language collections (1998).



Yi women's folk singing group, Amo Niuniu, performing in a folksong and contemporary poetry event (2008).

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Lu Juan in pop culture clothing from her collection *Indigo May* (2006; used with author's permission).



Lu Juan in traditional Nuosu Yi clothing (from her collection *Indigo May* (2006; used with author's permission)).